

Watson wins big photo contest in Florida

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Lori Gragg Watson put Union County in the spotlight when she won a photography competition last month at the Senior & Youth National Conference in Florida.

It was the photo conference and trade show's 10th anniversary, and more than 600 photographers of various skill levels came together to teach and compete.

Watson, a mother of five and former North Georgia Technical College instructor of photography, has attended the conference before, but she's never competed – until now.

The competition that Watson joined is called a shootout, in which all contestants must use the same equipment, model, props, setting, etc., and everyone has to take the best pictures they can in a set time-frame.

Only one person could win the competition and grand prize, which included a Panasonic LUMIX camera, a photo background from Background Town, and a complete Westcott continuous lighting system.

The competition equipment provided new challenges for Watson, who had never before used a mirrorless camera or a continuous lighting sys-

tem.

"It's an electronic viewfinder, it's not through the lens, and so I was actually dizzy when I got through shooting," said Lori.

She had five minutes to set up and shoot her pictures, and after time ended, she uploaded her photos and selected her favorite one for submission, without any editing, to Canon for printing.

Of course, Watson had nothing to lose by competing, and she had a feeling that she'd won the competition even before SYNC revealed the results.

"I knew immediately that it was going to be me before my image popped up on the screen," said Watson. "I don't know how I knew, it just came to me."

Watson has attended two conferences already this year, the other being the Professional Photographers of America in Nashville, and she views the experiences as a way to help push photographers outside of their comfort zones.

She said she'll definitely be attending more photo conferences in the future, and she plans on completing her master's degree in photography in the next two years.

The rewards from the competition have allowed her

the opportunity to use a new camera and lighting system to expand her skills and help her develop as a photographer.

Watson specializes in senior, family, corporate and destination wedding photography, and she runs the business Velvet Blue Portrait Art, which can be found on Facebook.

She plans to open a brick and mortar location for her business in May.

Watson is friends with Darren Harper, who is the program manager of the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority.

Harper has worked professionally as a photographer, and he said Watson is emblematic of the Union County photography community as a whole.

"Lori and I recently had the opportunity to volunteer as photographers at the Tim Tebow 'Night to Shine' event, and I was impressed with her professionalism and skills," said Harper.

Added Harper: "We have a very creative photography community here in Union County, and those skills are often employed on a volunteer basis. It goes to show how involved these people are in making Blairsville a better place to live."



Lori Watson, center, after winning a shootout photo contest at 2018 SYNC in Florida.



This is Lori Watson's winning photograph from the competition.

Photo by Lori Watson

Gun Range...from Page 1A



Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Col. Eddie Henderson of Georgia DNR with Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris on USFS land off Georgia 180.

the fate of the range, and gun club members were encouraged Friday when Jewett said she saw the need for adding a range in the area.

"I am enthusiastic about the meeting of the gun club and with the sheriff, and I think we are on the road to the right decision," said Supervisor Jewett. "It's a great old wildlife opening."

"It would be too pre-decisional for me to say it's a great site (for a range) without having dug a little deeper into it, because this is the first time I've been out here to this and considered it as a shooting range."

"So, it's a little soon, but I like the energy that's here, and I like the thought that the gun club and the county have tried to put into this site."

Next steps for the potential range include the making of an initial permit application, which will be done through the county to ease the process, as Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris wants to help the project get off the ground.

Once the application is accepted, the property must undergo a series of assessments for environmental, historical and other potential impacts, as well as a public comment process.

After that second phase is completed and if the range is approved, the county would then lease the property to the gun club for management and maintenance.

The application process should take roughly a month, during which time Supervisor Jewett will examine the legal ins and outs of the proposed range and its potential uses, though the subsequent environmental assessments phase will likely take three years or more to

complete.

"It was a very good meeting," said Paris. "I think the frustrating part is that we realize it's going to take probably a couple of years to get this done, but the positive part is, I think they're going to work with us in every way they can to make it happen."

Sheriff Mason was similarly heartened after the meeting, saying that he is thankful for the spirit of teamwork embodying the gun range effort.

"It sounds like they're going to be very cooperative and going to assist us in any way that they can," said Sheriff Mason of the Forest Service.

Others involved in the meeting were Steverson Moffat, acting District Ranger for the Blue Ridge Ranger District; Joel Katz and David McDonald of U.S. Congressman Doug Collins' office; Andrew Turnage of Georgia Secretary of State Brian Kemp's office; and Col Eddie Henderson of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

Local turnout for the meeting included Sheriff Mason; Commissioner Paris and County Manager Larry Garrett from Union County Government; and Paul Clark, Joan Moody, Gene Cooley and Charlie Azzarello of the Union County Gun Club Board.

A key aspect of the Union County range would be its ability to accommodate rifle shooting at 200-plus yards, pistols and potentially shotguns.

Club members would have regular access to the range, with limited hours for the public, and local peace officers from the Union County Sheriff's Office and Blairsville Police Department would have a home to train for firearms

requalification.

Furthermore, the club would consider opening the range to students on the Union County 4-H Shotgun and BB Gun Teams, which would be particularly helpful since development of the 4-H shooting range came to a halt last year.

Following the meeting on Friday, Supervisor Jewett and Ranger Moffat went to check out the Chatuge Gun Club range just a handful of miles down the road in neighboring Towns County.

The Chatuge Gun Club has had a special use permit through the Forest Service since 1981, and Jewett said she will be considering whether or not it makes sense to physically expand the range on Owl Creek Road to accommodate more people.

Members of the Chatuge Gun Club number more than 800, and the range sits on approximately eight acres of USFS land.